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EN377 Literature, Theory and Time

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Literature, Theory and Time Journal

One of the functions of narrative is to create one time in another time. (18)

Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York, 1974)

Arriving on Time: Language and Narrative in *Arrival*

Denis Villeneuve's film *Arrival* manipulates time in a number of ways, particularly in relation to language and cinematic chronology. Genette's ideas of prolepsis and analepsis feel particularly relevant for this text, since the film operates in both modes. Villeneuve is able to look both backwards and forwards in time through a science fiction story. It could be said that the whole film is a prolepsis. The central character, Louise, tells us her story not from beginning to end, but instead from end to beginning and back again. The aliens she encounters have a unique language; it is circular and as such the way in which they think (and think about time) is also circular. Furthering that, the cinematic language becomes cyclical in the telling of Louise's story. The chronology of the narrative keeps consistent throughout, but the order in which it is understood and presented is disordered.

Louise attempts to understand the language of the aliens that arrive on Earth, and in this discovery of language, her perception of time shifts. Therefore, language is the mechanism via which time is ruptured and consequently reconstructed. She is able to see the past and future simultaneously, and so the sequencing of her inner time mirrors the (un)sequencing of a social time. In this, I mean that her restructuring contributes to an unravelling of public time and therefore public order. In this way, time is the mechanism through which narrative is created, but it is also the subject of the narrative. It is emblematic of Mark Curries' discussion that texts are not just 'about time' but 'about

about time'. Villeneuve's film can be traced to what Currie observes about Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*; the narrative is still radically linear and the events happen in a chronological order but it is the perception of these events in time that disrupts the structural and formal sequencing, except in *Arrival* this happens within the narrative, too. Leading on from the idea that public/social time is disordered, time in *Arrival* is weaponised through language. In creating a new way of understanding the way we count and order time, Louise shapes political events and changes the course of not only her own narrative, but a social narrative. *Arrival* is both a story that formally reconstructs time, and that is about time, its (mis)use. A reordered cinematic narrative reflects and forms our understanding of the philosophical concepts that the film explores.

Reading *Pomona* through Bergson

It is interesting to think about the phenomenological time theories that Henri Bergson presents in relation to *Pomona* by Alistair McDowall. This play has a cyclical narrative which overlaps and crosses over itself, creating smaller theatrical narratives within the overarching story. It is important to consider the role of theatre in relation to ideas of duration and discourse time vs story time. I see the ideas that McDowall expresses in this play as speaking to the ideas that Bergson presents. The Christian Metz quote that prefigures this entry points to an important duality in McDowall's work – the time of the told story and the time of the plot. These two narrative ideas do not sit easily with each other in his work. Instead they grate on each other – particularly in *Pomona* it seems that McDowall is interested the way we tell and retell stories, and how that telling juxtaposes and influences the narrative time.

Mary Ann Giles states that 'this world is broken into segments in order to explain, analyse, and even understand the nature of experience' (12), and I think perhaps this is what McDowall explores in *Pomona*. His characters overlap – Ollie is both herself and the sister she is searching for, Keaton and Charlie play Dungeons and Dragons, but they also map out the preceding scenes. Time glitches alongside narrative, and the segmenting up of reality makes it both more comprehensive and more complicated. Bergson's statement that 'every perception is already memory. Practically, we

perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible process of the past gnawing into the future' can be applied to the knotty way in which McDowall presents his characters as both present and perceived as a memory. The whole play investigates the idea that the present is a process of the past gnawing into the future. As a result, multiple presents are created from multiple pasts – this is true in a philosophical sense of a subjective perception of time, but also true for Pomona because McDowall enacts this in his cyclical narrative.

Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimensions of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an inability to know it, that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing (6)

Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (John Hopkins UP, 1995)

The Cathy Caruth quote which prefigures these two entries encompasses a general understanding I have of trauma and memory; that the inability to know an event causes a repetitive seeing of it. This repetitiveness can create the distortion that Lauren Berlant points to in 'Trauma and Ineloquence'. She asks whether the rhetoric of retelling trauma and the form that takes "distract from, become a mask for, or intensify the unreachable or inarticulate thought that wants to change the norms of negation?" (41) In both these entries I will explore how language disrupts theories of time within the narratives and in their telling, and how the authors also use language to order time, when the body and mind cannot. Ultimately, I am asking whether the language we currently have is sufficient for the way that trauma acts on the body and mind, or if it in fact necessarily renders us inarticulate.

Illness and body in time – Memento Mori

Jonathon Nolan's short story *Memento Mori* (the basis for the film *Memento*) relates an experience of an ill body attempting to constitute itself in time. Nolan's primary character, Earl, is distinctly unreliable – his understanding of his surroundings is next to nothing in the opening moments of the

story, just as they are unknowable to the reader too. However, Nolan counteracts that with a further mysterious narrator, who addresses Earl directly. The ambiguity of the short story is rooted in Earl's (mis)understanding of his self and his environment. The content of the story is time and the body – lengthy paragraphs focus on theories of time and space, and on the ways that time works, or doesn't work. Nolan has analysed his own text before his reader can (perhaps this points to the belatedness that Caruth and Berlant touch upon?) Earl has experienced a traumatic event (we think someone raped and killed his wife) which has meant that he developed a kind of amnesia, or backwards dementia. He can only remember the past ten minutes of his life, until he forgets again, and it starts all over.

Significantly in Nolan's story, it is the dementia/forgetting theme that creates the disorder of Earl's time, rather than anything in the form of the piece itself. Time is disordered within the narrative by the body, and language is the thing which orders it. Language within the narrative is how Earl, or someone else, attempts to create chronology and subsequent understanding of his life. From post-it notes on the walls to tattoos, Earl is consistently relocated in his environment through language. The story is disordered only as a result of Earl's bodily disordering. What this might demonstrate is the idea that it is the body which changes and shifts time, and we might try and use language to reorder ourselves. However, if we return to Caruth's assertion that language is insufficient to describe trauma, this may seem fruitless. Perhaps language is necessarily disordered because of trauma; the language and therefore telling of trauma cannot follow a generic narrative in which one event follows another.

Trauma Theory in *The Accidental*

Building on from the discussion of trauma and language as a way of (dis)ordering time, Ali Smith's *The Accidental* presents the idea that form contributes to the meaning of a piece, and through Eve's work imagines how language might therefore become incidental in the politics of telling trauma. It is no coincidence that Eve's books in *The Accidental* are written in the same form as her own chapters. Both are written as a kind of Q&A, with an anonymous interviewer (maybe the reader herself?). Criticisms of Eve's work are wide ranging; she co-opts an individual and collective voice and turns it into political apathy. By changing stories and changing endings, Eve re-narrates history, but in doing

so obfuscates the violence that the too soon ending demonstrates. Furthermore, Eve suggests a singularity to history which, as historiography tells us, cannot exist.

Smith (perhaps somewhat clumsily) draws a parallel between narrating historical fiction and self-authoring. Eve attempts to narrate her own life in the same way she narrates her historical figure's imagined endings. Eve (and Smith?) inevitably becomes frustrated with her own form, deciding that it is inadequate to represent her full experience. Smith exposes the form of Eve's work (and language itself) as being wholly insufficient to describe a fictionalised individual trauma that suggests itself to be emblematic of a collective trauma. Perhaps Smith resists/expands upon this in her own form – she writes about four experiences of the same situation. Each experience takes its own literary form, and the voices she uses are distinctive and strange. Smith points to collectivity, despite drawing attention to the isolation and individualism of her characters in her language. Maybe this is where the friction exists most significantly in her text; the assumption she questions is drawn out and tested in her own writing.

The discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience. We normally envisage the future with the help of the same faculty that allows us to picture the past. (197)

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses' *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 197-222.

Eco-Time in X

If I were to reference a text that collated everything I am interested in about time, memory, ecology, generation, and narrative, it would be Alistair McDowall's *X*. Despite being a play about space and waiting, it in fact unlocks a number of avenues that lead away from the text's original purpose.

Chakrabarty asks how we can imagine a future that isn't moulded on the past that we already know. How can we envisage a future that we don't understand, don't have words for yet, and can't fathom? What McDowall discovers, I think, through his text is that in trying to imagine that future, language dissolves. Towards the end of the text words lose all meaning – McDowall covers three pages of

script in just the letter 'X'. When performed, time stretches thin over the letters, moving and arching around the voices until chronology no longer feels feasible. Once this moment happens, it seems as if nothing that preceded or proceeds it can make chronological sense – people appear who don't exist and stories are retold as if they never happened. The final scene rests between two timelines; a mother comforts her child and that same child looks on, but older now.

The threads of McDowall's text are certainly thin, and the links between the earth and motherhood and language are tenuous. However, I have come to think of this text as being about an 'eco-time', or at least, about the lack of it. Without being able to fathom a future, we are left with scraps of the past. McDowall collects these scraps and collates them into a fractured whole that eventually collapses in on itself. Anthropogenic futures are impossible to conceive – quite literally unimaginable – and so we are left without a sense of the 'ecological time' of our planet. And yet, when I look to texts like *Arrival*, *X*, *Annihilation*, *Escaped Alone*, narratives about time continue to be contingent upon the destruction and/or reformation of language. It is precisely that which is inexpressible (climate reality, apocalypse, unknown) that is comprehend through the expressed.¹

On *Arrival* and *The Encounter*

If there is a piece of music to describe the way that *Arrival* and *The Encounter* make me feel it would certainly be 'On The Nature of Daylight' by Max Richter. It crescendos and plateaus with such ease. I wish I could write into words that moment where the second crescendo comes in. It is exactly like the feeling of watching the camera spin around and around and around and around Amy Adams while she realises that everything and nothing has happened and it's all happening at the same time. The feeling of watching the bit in *The Encounter* where Simon throws all the things off his desk and smashes and smashes and smashes.

I like the stories that trick you a little bit. I don't like guessing the twist. I like the stories where the clocks melt and turn inwards on themselves, twisting and gesticulating inside the narrative.

¹ This idea is stolen from Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts* (3), and she steals it from Wittgenstein.

I like the stories which tell you one thing is true, and then later on tell you that the idea of truth isn't really an idea at all, but a lie we tell ourselves. There are certain moments that you remember, from the things that really change you and change your ways of thinking. When the strings come in, that's when I feel it. When Simon switches the headphones on, that's when I feel it. When the lights go up onto the back wall of the Barbican, and the stage looks like it could be submerged in a vast ocean, that's when I feel it. When Amy Adams' daughter makes the clay animals, and the camera pans over, that's when I feel it all, all the things that happen before and after and not yet.

I feel like taking a huge breath. I want all of time and space to fill my lungs; the before and the after and the now to enter into my bronchi and alveoli. I want them to have a conversation with each other, down in the bottom of my lungs, talk it out and find out that even though they don't speak the same language, they are all saying the same thing. I think we could all be friends, if we just heard the same music. That's what Simon McBurney tells us, in his rhythm, his pace. I think if we all just saw each other a bit better - saw into the before and the after and the now at the same time - we might be able to talk it out. We might be able to come to a conclusion, to see that we don't have to see ourselves as separate from the rotations of the moon, and we don't have to know each other's real names to know that we sleep under the same sun.

It takes meeting an alien. It takes meeting an alien and teaching it our language. It takes getting lost in the amazon. It takes reading a book about getting lost in the amazon. It takes one man on one stage for six years. It takes meeting another person, standing in front of them, and knowing them and learning their language and understanding that they know the before and the after and the now in a different way to how you know it. Understanding that if you see it from their way things might just look different. The clocks might just melt, the truth might just shatter, the film might get lost, the revolutions of the sun might just make sense as parallel to the revolutions of the moon. It is opposite but the same.

I don't make a big distinction between writing about "myself" and writing about "larger issues." (Maybe I'm Emersonian in that way, or just feminist.) I guess I treat myself as a sort of mystery or microcosm or materialized fulcrum for the larger issues in a project, be they justice, fear, spectacle, voyeurism, heartbreak, sadism, masochism, happiness, perception, pain, privilege, injustice, etc.

Maggie Nelson, qtd in 'Riding the Blinds' an interview in the LA Review of Books by Micah McCrary, 2015

Women's Time and Growing Up in *20th Century Women*

20th Century Women encapsulates such a feeling, such a warmth in its breadth and scenery, in its effortless dialogue, in its apocalyptic idealism. It uses time so well - to narrate a certain era, and the feeling of those eras slipping away through generations, and a personal time that swings between the past identities and future consequences of the characters. The burning car is a hyperbolic image to open with and revel in, as ridiculous for Benning's character as it is for the viewer. What will the second long clips of my childhood look like? Not only does Mike Mills' film *20th Century Women* capture the precarity of a society in flux, it also captures the unsteady times of motherhood and adolescence.

The film follows a family in Santa Barbara in 1979; Annette Benning plays a mother who is worried about raising her son right. she's not sure if she knows exactly how to do it, so she enlists the help of two young women. I wonder if this can be read in relation to Julia Kristeva's theory of 'Women's Time' – Benning's character is central and the film tilts on her axis – in asking the two women in her life to care for her son, she enacts a kind of female time. Puberty and an understanding of the future becomes constituted through women and the female experience. In narrating the slightly unreal reality of adolescence, Mills allows a young boys upbringing to be centred on women's ageing – the two things seem so separate, but are in fact two ways that time changes the body, and emotion along with it. *20th Century Women* looks at the way in which individual family time is contingent on

and influenced by ideas of masculinity and femininity, but also at how generations position themselves in decades. The film takes place in 1979, and Jimmy Carter's 'Crisis of Confidence' speech acts as a political undercurrent for the film. A loss of faith in oneself and one's government disrupts ideas of futurity and time – when we cannot trust those in charge to lead us, how can we hope for a future? The final moments of the film are each character explaining their futures, how their lives will pan out – “I will marry and settle down” etc. We are not sure whether this is an imagined future, or one which actually happens, and we have experienced this telling retrospectively. Ageing is suddenly compressed, and we are left with a compounded sense of self – we saw these characters in minute detail, and then suddenly we leave them with no detail at all.²

(Re)reading *The Argonauts*

I began to write this entry about the annotations in the margins of *The Argonauts*, and I still think that's a fruitful avenue to explore, but as soon as I started reading journals and watching salons about her text I realised it would be almost impossible to write something objective. Nelson writes a genre-defining 'auto theory', and it is in her writing of this that I realise that everything I write is bursting to become a kind of auto theory. Objectivity seems irrevocably ridiculous now – literature is made to feel and yet we ask ourselves to stand outside of our own bodies. I understand auto theory as a kind of extension of the personal essay – it is about applying theory to life and vice versa. When Roland Barthes writes about saying 'I Love You', he attempts to understand something fundamental about us, and when I read his essay for the first time I realise that I've been saying it wrong all this time. Nelson's fragmented narrative of her own queer love story knocks itself back and forth, and ebbs and flows like the tide. Her timeline is not straight but queered, made strange, and turned inside out. What happens if I see that in my own life? My own experience turned inwards and made a new with each new text I read, and each new essay I write.

In a salon for Maggie Nelson by the Barnard Center for Research on Women in 2016 Christina Crosby says that Nelson taught her how to be confessional and helped her to understand that

² Is this a Capitalist time – finality ensured and certainty prevails?

to know someone through their writing is not to know them at all. To rewrite oneself through theory and criticism seems impossible? necessary? vital? intangible? To rewrite myself in Nelson's shadow, just as she sits in the shadows of Sedgwick, Winnicott, Barthes, is inevitable. Whether or not she created something 'radical' in her book, she has radically altered my 'self', my written self and performed self, my future and my past selves. When Nelson puts her authors in her margins, she is not quoting them in our received academic way or denoting their significance; she is shadowing her rewritten self in those who helped that rewriting take place. There is no pattern to when she quotes in text and in margin (Weigman, 'In the Margins with The Argonauts'), maybe that is because there is no telling how these authors will imagine themselves in our language – is it in the shadows of our writing, in our vows, in our books, on our bodies?

I can't remember half of anything but you're in all of it. You're in everything. All jumbled around. (150)

Alistair McDowall, *X* (2016, Bloomsbury)

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